

Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee Minutes

*6:00 -7:45 PM - Thursday, February 10,
2014*

Attendees

Present: **Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council; **Marco T. Camacho** (Alternates) Newport City Council; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee; **Justin S. McLaughlin**, Newport City Council, Vice Chair; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **William R. O'Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee; **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair

Not Present: None

Approval of Minutes

Minutes of the January 23, 2014 meeting of the Exploratory Committee were reviewed and unanimously approved.

Cost Estimates

Mr. Power and other members of the Committee began the meeting with a discussion of the necessity of a cost estimate for establishment of the Unified High School District. It was agreed that such an estimate was necessary but care should be exercised in specifying what was and was not included in the estimate. Mr. Power noted that the consolidation of Newport's elementary schools and building of Pell and renovation of Thompson Middle School required substantial advocacy and promotion, but succeeded because such efforts were based on solid cost estimates. Mr. Power summarized by saying that the voters could not be asked to approve high school regionalization without understanding the costs involved. It was suggested that once the process and/or actions were defined, costs could and should be identified.

Review of Draft Enabling Legislation

Mr. Adams began the discussion of the Draft Enabling Legislation by describing the enactment process. He emphasized that the Draft would be forwarded to our legislative delegation only after approval by the Exploratory Committee; it would be submitted as actual legislation and be considered by legislative committees and the RI Legislature only after approval by municipal Councils.

The Committee began a paragraph-by-paragraph review of the Draft Enabling Legislation. All agreed to changes to be incorporated in a revision of the Draft Enabling Legislation which would be available in the next week for review. Significant changes are as follows:

Sect.3. Para. I. Transition Period

The Committee discussed the length of the transition period and the activities that should be completed during that period. It was agreed that the transition period should have a definite end point, June 30, 2017.

Sect.3. Para. II. Labor Provisions

It was agreed that one of the first orders of business of the Unified HS Board will be the reconciliation of the labor contracts of Newport and Middletown employees. The Committee discussed how this might be accomplished and how specialized services such as Special Education can be effectively provided. It was suggested that some services may be consolidated and/or provided on a fee-for-service basis. It was agreed that the Draft Enabling Legislation provides adequate authority to accomplish these critical functions and services.

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Sect.3. Para. III. The Unified High School Board

The Committee discussed the composition, election, periods of service and other characteristics of the proposed Board. The Committee agreed that a six (6) member Board was appropriate member. To avoid deadlocks it was agreed that a four (4) vote majority should be required for approval of any measure before the Board.

Sect.3. Para. IV. Organization of the Unified High School District Board

It was agreed that the officers of the Board should be as described in the draft with the exception that the Board should be allowed considerable flexibility in electing officers. It was noted that the “Treasurer” should be everywhere referred to as the “Financial Director”.

Sect.3. Para. V. Powers and Duties of Unified High School District Board

The Committee reviewed and discussed each paragraph related to the powers and duties of the Board. Significant elements of that discussion are described below.

Sect.3. Para. V.(3) Authority to Lease from Municipalities

The Committee held a general discussion of high school leasing arrangements and agreed that all references to debt should be deleted since the Unified High School District would not issue bonds or other debt instruments. Other agreed adjustments to the draft text are to be incorporated into the next revision.

Sect.3. Para.V.(4) through Sect.3. Para.V.(18)

In general the Committee agreed that these paragraphs are appropriate and adequate. Minor changes in text were suggested and incorporated and paragraphs renumbered as necessary.

The paragraphs “Authority to Borrow” and “Authority to Incur Temporary Debt” were deleted in their entirety.

Sect.3. Para. VII. Type of District

It was noted that the text should be altered to restrict the district type to grades 9 - 12 only.

Sect.3. Para. VIII. Means of Apportioning Expenses

A general discussion was held of this paragraph and the financial process generally. Discussion centered on the proposed Joint Financial Committee, its composition, powers and authority. The Committee agreed that the Joint Committee could function effectively to reconcile differences between budgets developed by the Unified Board and the appropriating Councils.

The Committee also agreed that members of the Joint Financial Committee should not be unduly restricted but left to municipal Councils.

The revised Draft Enabling Legislation incorporates language reflecting the comments and recommendations of the Exploratory Committee.

Mr. Power suggested that it would be appropriate and prudent to invite a representative from the Bristol-Warren regional district to the next Committee meeting to discuss the district’s actual experience with the regional district funding process. [Post meeting note: The Chair of the Bristol-Warren Regional School District committee agreed to meet with the Committee on February 24, 2013.]

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Sect.3. Para. X. Admittance and Withdrawal of Districts

The Committee agreed that the withdrawal process described in the Draft text was generally appropriate. Correction and clarifications of the text were suggested and were incorporated.

Sect.3. Para. XI.(3) Joint Financial Committee

The Committee continued discussion of the Joint Financial Committee and the financial process. Mr. Adams agreed to provide a sketch of the process as described in the Draft Enabling Legislation.

Sect.4. Approval Question

Discussion of the text of the referendum question was deferred to the next meeting. Mr. McLaughlin noted that the Committee should think about what sort of data and explanation should be included in the referenda explanation for voters.

Schedule

Discussion of a draft calendar of events was deferred to the next meeting. The pacing event is submission of a referendum question to the voters in both municipalities in the November 2014 election.

A revised sketch of the Newport County Unified High School implementation process was attached to the meeting minutes of January 23, 2014.

Proposed Meetings Calendar

The Committee agreed to meet as follows.

Date	Time	Place
Monday February 24 th	4 – 6 PM	Newport Public Library, Rotary Conference Room, 1 st floor
Monday, March 10 th	6 – 8 PM	Tentatively, Middletown Public Library Conference Room
Monday March 24 th	6 – 8 PM	TBD
Thursday, April 17 th	6 – 8 PM	TBD
Tuesday April 29 th	6 – 8 PM	TBD

Agenda Items

Committee members are asked to submit agenda items by February 14, 2014.

Agreed Items

Item	To Do	By Whom?	When?
Draft Calendar & Timeline	Create a calendar of events for distribution to Committee members	VonVillas	Next meeting 2/24/2014

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Additional Comments on Enabling
Legislation Markup

Send all comments, corrections and
markup to Dick Adams.

All Members

Inputs by
2/20/2014

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams

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*Article in "Newport Daily News"
February 11, 2014
by Matt Sheley*

Provided for Information only.

NEWPORT — The Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee continues to try to find common ground between Newport and Middletown for a new shared high school.

Meeting Monday night in an upstairs conference room at the Community College of Rhode Island campus on John H. Chafee Boulevard, the group went through a 12-page draft of enabling legislation to guide a new unified school district, should it win approval in each community. The document was drawn largely from the existing deal governing the Bristol-Warren regional school district.

Committee members did not reach any agreements, but seemed to find consensus on a number of items.

Those included having three members representing each community on a unified school board governing the school district, how the budget would be put together and how Newport or Middletown would get out of the arrangement should it not work, among dozens of other concepts.

The group's next meeting is scheduled for Monday, Feb. 24 at 6 p.m., likely in the Newport Public Library. Committee members said their goal is to have representatives from Bristol- Warren schools to discuss what has worked and where the pitfalls have been for them.

"In my mind, this is about an engagement, not a marriage," said Newport City Councilman Justin S. McLaughlin, exploratory committee vice chairman. "This document basically commits the towns to getting engaged, but if the unified school district board can't agree how to get it done, then there will be no marriage."

Facing rising costs and educational demands, local officials for more than a decade have talked about Newport and Middletown combining schools to provide better opportunities for all students and help save money.

According to a June 2009 report from the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth could have saved close to \$13 million in fiscal 2013 by creating a regional high school.

To date, the item has been a relative nonstarter, failing to gain critical mass among parents and business people in the community. Reaching out to neighboring communities to gauge their interest last summer, Middletown was only able to secure Newport as a partner in the process.

Since early January, the exploratory committee has met to try to work out the logistics of how the unified school district and the high school itself would function.

Should the group find common ground, the plan is for the exploratory committee to ask the Newport City Council and Middletown Town Council for permission to seek enabling legislation from the General Assembly to place a ballot question before voters on Election Day, Nov. 4. Unlike the group's first meeting, there was limited discussion

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about where the new school would be and how it would be paid for. Instead, committee members focused on how the new unified school district itself would function.

Going through the document assembled by the Middletown Town Councilman Richard P. Adams, there was discussion on everything from whether the unified school district would have the power to sue, like a municipality, to whether existing debt and retirement obligations of the Newport and Middletown school departments be carried forward to the new organization.

The answer to those questions was no, that the school departments would be responsible for their own liabilities.

At the same time, committee members agreed new contracts would need to be completed with the teachers unions in each community along with other staff. The draft legislation also specified there could be no layoffs of certified and non-certified staff for one year as a result of unification.

Several committee members wondered if the group would be better off trying to merge all school department functions in both communities under one umbrella rather than create a unified school group just at the high school level.

Concerned the creation of a third bureaucracy would be a tough sell at a time when most people were looking to cut expenditures, not potentially increase them, the group opted to move forward on the current track for now.

“When any of these referendums come up on a ballot, the first question people want to know is, ‘Is it going to cost me money?’ and ‘How much?’” Newport School Committeeman Robert B. Power said. “Depending on those answers, I can’t envision this will go anywhere unless people have a sense about what that’s going to be. If we can’t quantify it and put a dollar amount on it, I can’t imagine people will ever go near this.”

Others said without a strong foundation laid out by the enabling legislation, it would be difficult for the effort to get off the ground. An educational outreach campaign touting the unified school effort could begin as soon as next month.

“You have to know where you are going before you know what it’s going to cost,” Middletown Town Councilwoman Barbara A. Von-Villas, exploratory committee chairwoman.